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# Competence for Foreign Language Learning and Teaching. Introduction

Competence is one of the fashionable terms which permeate public and academic discourses of the 21st century. Accompanied by a plethora of meanings, competence has, rather expectedly, become an inflated notion (Weinert & Helmke, 1998; Virkus, 2009). While we intuitively know what competence, competency or a competent person mean, precise definitions are hard to obtain. To paraphrase Felstead et al. (2002), considering the enormous interest in competence – its structure, development and distribution – there is surprisingly little consensus on what competence actually refers to. This status quo is not helped by context-dependence of competence, i.e. its conceptual reliance on a particular domain within which the term is applied. Thus, the use of competence in psychology, economics or linguistics renders dissimilar understandings, with no framework generally accepted to support them (Koper, 2000).

Imprecise on the one hand, competence is simultaneously (and rather paradoxically) viewed as self-explanatory. A combination of intricate cognitive skills, complex knowledge structures, interpersonal and social abilities, as well as attitudes and values, competence is taken as given, with most researchers assuming its meaning to be apparent or transpiring from everyday contexts (see Savolainen, 2002 for an overview). Likewise,

interpretations of terms functioning as synonyms for or/and components of competence, e.g. ability, skill or knowledge, are often taken for granted. For instance, Virkus (2003) reports that the domain of information literacy studies abounds in phrases like "information competence skills", "information literacy skills", or "information literacy competence/competencies", often used by the same authors and seldom accompanied by any explanations.

Consequently, we are confronted with a situation where a term, i.e. competence, which is difficult, if not impossible, to define, constitutes a key concept in the literature(s) of social sciences and the humanities.

As suggested by its title – *Conceptualizing competence(s) for foreign language learning and teaching across Europe and beyond* – this special issue of the Theoria et Historia Scientiarum Journal (THS) is founded on the notion of competence in the context of foreign language education. The importance of competence for foreign language learning and teaching is undeniable and amply documented (Council of Europe, 2001, 2017) and so are the problems related to the term. To begin with, as in many other scientific domains, competence in linguistics and language education is used generously, if vaguely. Taking a top-down orientation first, a common core to competence is hard to assemble from its many available definitions. Regarded as a general psychological, dispositional construct (Anderson, Lawton, Reixen & Hubbard, 2006), a specialized performance construct (Council of Europe, 2016), or the subjective estimation of personal performance resources and related motivational action tendencies (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002), competence escapes a uniform conceptual framework, and although some of its dimensions, i.e. knowledge, skills or attitude, can be seen as recurrent (see Strugielska and Piątkowska, 2018 for an overview), these attributes are neither absolutely clear themselves nor totally agreed upon as forming the core of the notion. Hence, rather than essentializing competence, attempts have been made to conceptualize the notion as internally complex, or multi-layered. Consequently, foreign language learning may require developing metacompetencies or key competences (Council of Europe, 2006) in order to make the acquisition of new ones and the use of those already available more efficient. Metacompetencies embrace cognitive, motivational and volitional elements and are said to facilitate transfer across tasks, content areas and purposes. Likewise, action competence (Council of Europe, 2016) combines an individual's cognitive and motivational resources needed for a particular goal, demand or task, often related to a professional situation. Finally, key competencies (Council of Europe, 2016) are those used for attaining good performance across a variety of situations and include language

and mathematical skills and abilities, media skills, and those included in general education. While promising as an alternative to a narrowly-defined competence, a hierarchical/developmental view upon the notion is, as yet, too incoherent to serve the purpose. One of its major drawbacks is lack of sound theoretical foundation for the implied development of skills – from the most general metacompetences through more situation-bound action competencies to domain-specific linguistic or mathematical abilities. Relatedly, no cognitively plausible platform has been built to support proposed interconnectedness between thought and action, knowledge and volition or individual and social aspects of the mind. Thus, it seems that layers of competence need to be further and more firmly integrated within an overall, theoretically sound approach for the notion to be understandable and implementable (Langlotz, 2015).

Taking a bottom-up approach next, competence in foreign language education is equally difficult to interpret on the basis of its many subordinates. One of them is undoubtedly intercultural (communicative) competence (IC) (Byram, 1997), with its numerous uses and interpretations. For instance, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009, p. 6) argue for understanding, co-orientation or satisfaction as synonyms for IC, adding that "empathy, perspective taking, and adaptability continue to serve as the hallmarks of most models of IC". On the other hand, Deardorff (2011) enumerates six recurrent criteria of IC, i.e. respect, self-awareness/identity, seeing from other perspectives, listening, adaptation, relationship building, and cultural humility. Clearly, then, it is impossible to infer coherent understanding of IC out of its interpretations, let alone defining competence for foreign language learning and teaching on the basis of intercultural (communicative) competence, i.e. one of its subordinates. Similarly ineffective is an attempt to combine IC with other categories within the framework of foreign language education. For instance, linguistic competence (LC) is defined in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 108–109) as consisting of lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic competences and involving "the ability to understand and express meaning by producing and recognizing well-formed phrases and sentences" according to general rules (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 116). If both IC and LC are taken as subordinate categories crucial for interpreting competence for foreign language learning and teaching, a common denominator for them becomes elusive unless a theoretically grounded classification joining empathy or identity and abstract grammar rules can be proposed. Such a solution, however, is hard to obtain since new labels to refer to subcategories of competence, e.g. plurilingual, pluricultural or mediation, are constantly introduced.

While both top-down and bottom-up approaches to competence for foreign language learning and teaching show that the notion escapes precise definitions, there is an urgent need to identify it since formal language education is competence-based (see Gervais, 2016 for an overview). Our ability to write meaningful goals and objectives for language courses, to identify appropriate learning outcomes, and to develop assessment criteria are all founded on what we mean by competence. Our students' possibilities to participates in mobility programs are dependent on how educators across Europe and beyond interpret competences for foreign language learning and teaching. Le et al. (2014) report that although competence-based education is a developing field there is no universally shared definition of what makes it competence based.

The aim of this volume is thus to contribute to the on-going discussion on how to interpret competence for foreign language learning and teaching, particularly within institutionalized settings, so that competence-based language education becomes more tangible, measurable and compatible. On a more specific note, the articles collected here can be viewed as referring to competence from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives, trying to look for theoretically-motivated interpretations of the concept and/or its subcategories. Coherence within the volume can thus be sought among understandings of competence (and underlying approaches) as well as its component categories, e.g. intercultural or linguistic competences, and the results of this search are expected to provide answers to the following questions:

1. is there a common theoretical foundation supporting particular interpretations of competence (or its subcategories)?
2. is there uniformity among understandings of competence for foreign language learning and teaching?
3. is there consistency among analyses of subcategories of competence for foreign language learning and teaching?

The kind(s) of answers emerging from the eight articles gathered in this special issue of THS will let us support or reject the practicality of employing competence as a key notion for foreign language learning and teaching.

The first paper, "Challenges with defining competence for foreign language learning and teaching on the basis of the Common European Framework of Reference", by Ariadna Strugielska and Katarzyna Piątkowska highlights a blurred nature of competence in the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001, 2017), which results in incongruities in defining the notion in research based on the document. Viewing competence as a composite construct, the Framework (Council

of Europe, 2001, 2017) defines the notion as an interplay of knowledge, skills, characteristics and attitudes with complex relations between them, leading to circuitous connections within and between general and communicative competences. This intricate and knotty nature of competence in the Framework (2001, 2017), according to the authors, leads to imprecision in defining, interpreting and analyzing competence for foreign language learning and teaching in research. Consequently, Strugielska and Piątkowska provide examples of studies, demonstrating various perceptions and divergence in defining competence. Thus, the authors conclude that both the nature and connections between competences in the Framework (Council of Europe, 2001, 2017) are too complex to be categorized, voicing a need for a more unified approach to competence for foreign language learning and teaching.

The second paper, "Assessment of University Students' English Grammar Proficiency in terms of CEFR Criterial Achievement Levels: the Case of Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences", by Gerda Mazlaveckienė takes a critical look at the nature of grammatical competence from the perspective of aligning the requirements for foreign language learning and teaching with the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). The author bases her arguments on a study carried out among students of English Philology at Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences (LEU) whose main goal was to explore the extent to which the list of grammatical features proposed by the Cambridge English Profile Programme represents grammatical competence of university students. First, analyzing the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), the author demonstrates that grammatical competence is underspecified in the document, which results in lack of clear guidelines for assigning learners to a particular level. Specifically, Mazlaveckienė argues that although the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) adopts a functional approach to grammatical competence, the descriptors for this competence are scarce in terms of linguistic features (i.e. lexis and grammar) which are expected to be mastered by language learners and tested by teachers. Thus, the author's analysis of grammatical competence based on the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) reveals a blurred nature of this competence consisting of underspecified categories. As Mazlaveckienė further demonstrates in her research, grammatical competence of B1, B2, C1 and C2 learners reveals different criterial features from those referred to in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), which supports the argument that this competence may be defined in an unclear way. Namely, the subjects of the study used a restricted repertoire of grammatical structures as well as structures typical of their mother tongue. Thus, the research shows that it is difficult to assign learners

to a particular proficiency level according to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) grammatical criteria. Consequently, Mazlaveckienė appears to support the argument that competence for foreign language learning and teaching is unanalysable and defies definition. As a result, neither does the author define competence itself nor does she set the notion in any approach.

In "Strategies and Resources for the Acquisition and Learning of Communicative Competence in the Foreign Language" Raquel Sánchez Ruiz focuses on the subcompetences of communicative competence according to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), i.e. linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences. The author analyses these competences in terms of strategies developing them in foreign language and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) classes. The discussion centres on a Spanish context. First, noticing that communicative competence has been defined differently by various authors using a plethora of approaches in the tradition of foreign language teaching, Sánchez Ruiz accentuates a vague nature of this competence. Second, the author further argues that by distinguishing between competence and key competence (both of which contain different subcategories), one of the most essential documents of the Council of Europe (2006) not only does not help to untangle the unspecificity of the notion but introduces a further dilemma as far as the structure of competence is concerned. This undetermined nature of competence affects, as the author demonstrates, the interpretation of competence and key competence for foreign language learning and teaching in the Spanish context, where the former has been traditionally defined as linguistic competence and the latter as competence in linguistic communication referring to the extent to which learners have mastered productive and receptive skills. Given these ambiguities concerning competence, Sánchez Ruiz does not adopt any particular approach to both competence and communicative competence.

In her paper, "The view(s) on intercultural competence at a European and a national level – a case study", Paula Budzyńska emphasizes ambiguities in definitions of intercultural competence at a European and national level (Polish in this case). While the interpretation of intercultural competence for foreign language learning and teaching at a European level is dominated by the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), emphasizing pragmatic aspects of the construct, the Polish context (coursebooks in particular) focuses on affective and cognitive dimensions of the notion. Thus, the author concludes that intercultural competence needs an approach which will bridge the discrepancies in the interpretation of the construct. Consequently, the divergence in the perspectives on intercultural competence does not allow the

author to provide a clear definition of competence or set either intercultural competence or competence itself in a specific approach.

Elena Gómez Parra in her paper "Bilingual and Intercultural Education (BIE): Meeting 21st century educational demands" discusses the interplay of intercultural and bilingual competence, arguing for both the inseparability of the two types of competence and an approach to foreign language learning and teaching which will embrace this reciprocation. However, the author stresses that although the role of intercultural competence for foreign language learning and teaching has been researched for many years, the structure of this competence has not been agreed upon yet. Thus, the author states that intercultural competence is "an uneven and changing competence" (Gómez Parra in this volume) and, consequently, does not provide any categorical definition of this competence. Similarly, even though bilingual competence has been implemented for many years over the world in language education, various approaches to the concept have focused on different aspects of this competence, which results in an unclear nature of this competence. Thus, Gómez Parra's paper demonstrates that competence as well as its subcompetences, i.e. intercultural and bilingual, are difficult to categorize.

Focusing on students' views of the role of poetry in education, Katharina Dahlbäck, Anna Lyngfelt and Viktoria Bengtsdotter Katz in "Views of poetry as a competence expressed by students in teacher education**"** consider competence referring to poetry. The authors view this type of competence as both knowledge of poetry understood as means of aesthetic expressions and the ability to perceive sensible experiences through which knowledge is manifested. Thus, competence is equated with knowledge and ability.

"Today's teachers' CEFR competence in the classroom – a view of critical pedagogy in Vietnam" by Khang Nguyễn Duy focuses on teachers' self-competence related to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) from various perspectives of critical pedagogy. The arguments are developed on the basis of a study carried out by the author in a Vietnamese context. However, although the results of the research show the importance of many competences not mentioned in the tradition of foreign language teaching, the author does not define the components of these competences or competence itself.

All seven papers demonstrate that it is difficult to define both competence for foreign language learning and teaching and its subcomponents (only one paper views the construct as knowledge or ability). Furthermore, none of the papers locates competence in any particular approach, which speaks to an inflated nature of the construct.

# Conclusions

The key problem seems the nature of pragmatic recommendations included in the guidelines (see Strugielska and Piątkowska in this volume), whose lack of firm theoretical foundations and contradictory implications (see Mazlaveckienė, Budzyńska or Sánchez Ruiz in this volume) encourages multifarious conceptualizations of competence. This tendency is clearly reflected in further articles, where competence for foreign language learning and teaching encompasses linguistic, intercultural, bilingual abilities as well as aesthetic with no links among them. Such a network does not constitute a foundation for competence-based language education.

The papers in this special issue of THS demonstrate that a solid approach is needed which will be based on a construct other than competence. It appears that a socio-cognitive approach with its symmetrical focus on the social and the cognitive and its motivated cognitive notions, including the stable and the schematic based on innate cognitive, dynamic and situated capabilities. In this approach the hierarchy of constructs is motivated as opposed to competence, which requires adjusting to a new conceptual apparatus anchored in a multimodal and grounded approach to cognition.

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